

The Unit Concept of Prayer Fellowship or With Whom Can We Pray?

By Jeff Wegner

[Tri-Circuit Pastor's Conference Frost Valley YMCA Claryville, NY January 25-26, 2010]

Imagine what we have at our disposal . . . *PRAYER!* It is like a phone call to God that is never busy, never disconnected and is always answered. Prayer is the proverbial text messaging or twitter to God. It is an amazing ability to speak with God and always receiving an answer.

As amazing as prayer is and as easy as it is to use, there are many times in dire situations when we think or encourage, something like . . . “well, remember, you can always pray.” Almost as if prayer is an afterthought.

So briefly, let's review what we know about prayer. Turning to the scriptures we find the “model” prayer being taught by our Savior himself in Matthew 6:9-13:

⁹“This, then, is how you should pray: " 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us today our daily bread. ¹²Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”

Christ certainly teaches a gem, as he only petitions once for earthly “things.” The entire prayer asks for spiritual things. He teaches us to ask for the all-important spiritual things. How does that hold up against the last prayer that ran through your mind or dropped from your lips?

From the book of Hebrews we read: **Without faith it is impossible to please God** (He.11:6), and learn that the only acceptable prayer is from a believer who has faith in Jesus. As God's Word proclaims, we teach, believe and confess that believers can bring any kind of prayer to our heavenly Father, we read: **Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.** (Phil. 4:6). We know prayer is something that can be done anytime and anywhere, as scripture says: **Pray continually.** (1 Thes. 5:17). We also know that beside using the Savior's “model” prayer, the Christian is encouraged to use his own words as Hannah did (1 Samuel 1:10-16) in her desperate prayer to God for a son. We can also use words taught from others as John the Baptist taught prayer to his disciples (Luke 11:1). Finally, the Christian is taught that prayer is talking to God like we talk to each other in common, everyday language, knowing that, **the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective** (James 5:16b).

I personally believe that people in our congregations know and believe these things about prayer. We know and brush elbows with people in our congregations who practice these scriptural truths daily. We can praise our God that His people know and practice prayer, continually.

If that was the assignment of this paper, the steering committee may have failed in assigning something we all know and practice daily or I may have failed by taking the subject of prayer too lightly, presenting the subject in less than a page. But the subject of this paper is larger in scope and just may center on the word “practice.” I may know what, when, where, to whom and for whom I am to pray. The bigger question - maybe the more appropriate question when it comes to the subject of prayer is - with whom can we pray?

(2)

In our circles, the term used in the context of “with whom we can pray” is *prayer fellowship*. It may be a subject that has not been discussed in a long time, maybe never in our ministries. In fact, the subject may be

something we read about as taking place back in the late 1950's or early '60's. Indeed, the battles over fellowship in general and prayer fellowship more specifically, raged long and hard during those decades. The issues were settled only after two Synodical splits took place, leaving the people who survived, sure and steadfast in their convictions, truths and beliefs concerning the entire teaching of fellowship.

In order to begin a discussion on prayer fellowship it is important to understand and remind ourselves of the teaching of church fellowship, since prayer fellowship has its basis in church fellowship.

As long as we live here on this earth, we draw lines of separation among denominations. It is only natural that we would want to band together as groups (congregations) of churches to do a number of things from mission work to feeding the hungry. That is why the nearly 1300 congregations of our Synod are "walking together" doing all aspects of church work in our country and throughout the world.

When Synods or individual congregations want to accomplish certain aspects of church work, it would only seem natural that they would reach out to others to help in that work. That is where the question arises for Bible believing and following Christians. The question: who can we join with in doing the work our Lord would have us do while here on earth?

Prof. Lyle Lange says in his book, *God So Loved the World – A Study of Christian Doctrine*, concerning this question: "***The basis for fellowship in the visible church is agreement on all that Scripture teaches.***"¹ He continues to point to the Word of God as a basis for a statement like this. Jesus reminds his disciples at the Ascension (Matthew 28:20) **and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.** Much could be added concerning church fellowship, but the long and short of it is that our teaching of church fellowship is called the *unit concept* of fellowship. Lang states, "***this term means that, in the first place, all doctrines of Scripture must be dealt with as an indivisible unit when we are trying to determine with whom we may practice fellowship.***"² In its 1970 statement of Church Fellowship the WELS states: ***A Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God. The denial, adulteration, or suppression of any Word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief, John 8:31; Matthew 5:19; 1 Peter 4:11; Jeremiah 23:28,31; Deuteronomy 4:2; Revelation 22:18,19.***³

The teaching of the *unit concept* of fellowship gives us the Biblical principle through which we can carry out church fellowship in any given area as a unit. This principle gives Christians the opportunity to join together in various activities to express their unity or common faith. Any list might include: pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, fellowship in worship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in church work, missions and Christian education. Lange would conclude: "***Whether we worship together, commune together, pray together or do church work together, a unity on the basis of God's Word is necessary.***"⁴

The Doctrinal Statement of the WELS clarifies this *unit concept* of fellowship when it says:

We may clarify these joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur. . . . Yet, insofar as they are all expressions of faith, they are essentially one and the same thing and are all properly covered by a common designation, namely, church fellowship. Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith. Hence, Scripture can give the general admonition "avoid them" when church fellowship is to cease (Romans 16:17). Hence, Scripture sees an expression of church fellowship also in giving the right hand of fellowship (Galatians 2:9) and in greeting one another with the fraternal kiss (Romans 16:16); on the other hand, it points out that a

(3)

withholding of church fellowship may also be indicated by not extending a fraternal welcome to errorists and not bidding them Godspeed (2 John 10,11; cf. 3 John 5-8).⁵

Much more could be included here on the negatives aspects of Church fellowship, taught, believed and

confessed by other churches in comparison to the biblical teaching of the *unit concept* of fellowship. Reams of papers have been written concerning church fellowship since the 1950's up to this day, covering all aspects of fellowship. But that is not our goal, we wish to show how this unit concept works with the topic at hand, namely prayer fellowship.

Prayer fellowship is the question this paper intends to discuss. In the past, prayer fellowship was not discussed before the split between the WELS and the LCMS in the early 60's. Before that time both church bodies were in agreement on the topic. Once the split occurred, discussion of prayer fellowship was in the forefront throughout the synods. Today it is a timely topic because many of the WELS (and just as many of the LCMS) think the big difference between the WELS and the LCMS was about whom we can pray with. The real issue is whether or not it is right to pray and worship with those who are persistent in their error. That is really where the whole topic hinges. In general, prayer fellowship deals more with church bodies and not so much with individuals, yet the same principles will serve as guidelines.

Before taking a closer look at prayer fellowship and its application today, it is interesting to look at the action of the Church immediately after the Ascension. In Acts 2:42, Luke records: **They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.** It seems clear from a rather quick look at this passage, that those who followed the teachings of the apostles after the ascension, met in the temple with the others who followed their same teachings. To me it seems simple. The followers of the apostles met together for worship, bible class, communion and prayer with like-minded followers.

The problem comes when others who want to disprove the "unit concept" of fellowship use this passage to prove that the "apostle" followers who went to the temple to worship, pray and break bread were all one in the temple. They conclude that the "believers" practiced fellowship with the others, namely, the followers of the High Priest. This "mingling" of worship fellowship does not seem to flow, since the followers of the High Priest were teaching and practicing far different from the followers of the apostles. You will recall that the apostles were put into prison on numerous occasions for teaching and preaching differently from that of the followers of the High Priest (Acts 4:1-3, Acts 5:21). The fact that different groups met in the temple courts to worship separately can still be seen today at the Western Wall of the temple ruins in Israel as different groups with common beliefs congregate with their specific groups.

The apostle Paul practices the "*unit concept*" of fellowship as he makes his way from town to town. His practice followed going to the synagogue first, where he preached, prayed and taught until the leaders of the synagogue expelled him. Following being thrown out of the synagogue, he had no dealings – prayer nor pulpit fellowship – with them.

Down through history, the Church fathers, from Luther to Friedrich Balduin to Johannes Quenstedt to John Gerhard all dealt with the Catholics and the Reformed in the same way as the early Christians in the book of Acts 2:42. Maybe a quote from the LCMS *Der Lutheraner* of 1908 sums up all of history concerning fellowship: **from this we can see: 1. That we are following the same practice as the faithful Lutherans in the year 1645; 2. That this demand for public prayer with errorists and heretics is a characteristic of the Reformed, but is foreign to the true Lutheran church.**⁶

(4)

Former President of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Armin Schuetze makes the point very clear:

Joint prayer, praying with someone, is always an act of Christian fellowship even as it is always an act of Christian fellowship to go to Holy Communion together at the same altar. Of a handshake I may say: This handshake as you are installed as pastor is an expression of our unity of faith and is an act of Christian fellowship. Another handshake may be a mere friendly greeting with no religious fellowship implications. When we pray together, however, we cannot say: This prayer is nothing more than an act of friendship. The fact is that joint prayer always has religious implications, simply because prayer always is, or

should be, a religious action.⁷

I believe much more can be said concerning the historical perspective of the issue of fellowship, but that is not necessarily the point of this paper. In light of our review of prayer, a brief reminder of the unit concept of fellowship, and a little historical perspective, let's continue with the question at hand: "With whom can I pray?"

As stated above, the principles of fellowship which govern our practice with church bodies or groups will also govern our practice with individuals. It is only natural that anyone who holds on to a false doctrine will need to be told about their false teaching and it only holds true that we cannot practice fellowship with them. This is true of family or friends, just as it is true of church bodies or groups. Loyalty to God and his truths are of utmost importance (Matt. 10:32-39; 12:46-49). A brief summary of the principles involved is given in "Prayer Fellowship," a pamphlet put out by the Conference of Presidents of the WELS in 1954:

"It is always the will of God for his believers (whether in public or in private, whether as synodical representatives or as individuals) (a) to manifest in worship and in prayer the fellowship of faith that unites them, until and unless (b) confession of the truth and rejection of error require them to separate.⁸

Seminary Prof. John Brug in writing a paper of the practical applications of Church fellowship states:

The one practical difference is that when religious fellowship with family or friends involves only private actions which will not give public offense, we may consider not only the public confessions which they make through their church membership, but also their private, personal confession.⁹

So the public confession of the church which the family member or friend belongs will govern our fellowship with them in the public arena. In other words we, like the believers of Acts 2:42 would not participate in worship or prayer in their church services. In love, we would warn them about the false teaching of the church in which they held membership by not participating with them.

But in our private dealing with the family member or friend we might consider their private, personal confession. If they are members of a false teaching church and object to the teachings, even fighting against it, we would encourage them to fight for the truth, also warning them that the time may come when they will have to reject their church too. Their private confession to us and their public church membership are in deference and in time would have to be brought into harmony.

That may be the easy part since, it seems church membership will be the determining factor. If the family member or friend is unaware of the unscriptural beliefs or practices of the church and are not holding to these false teachings, we will want them too become aware of the problems, which they may be supporting by their offerings.

(5)

What about putting these truths into practice in the home? In our home or individual dealings with a friend or relative, there is no reason for the Christian family not to have prayers or devotions around their table with these friends. This would be no different than having guests in church. The head of the house or the devotion leader would continue with the normal routine of the house. We would not reject having other hear our prayers, using as an example the Apostle Paul as he was on his way to Rome (Acts 27:35). Our prayers or meditation may serve as a good witness and example to those guests in our home.

On the other hand, when we are a guest in the home of a person not of our faith, and he speaks his prayers while we are present, we will not disturb the prayers, even if we cannot join him in the prayers.

The most difficult problem in the case of the question: “with whom can I pray?” is determining whether or not the person is a weak brother/sister (one who does not know or understand the doctrinal differences) or a persistent errorist (one who knows and understands the errors, but refuses to do anything about them). Each situation will have to be determined on a case by case basis, keeping in mind the general principles, the Word of God and prayer.

May our gracious God always keep us knowledgeable of these truths of Scripture. May we practice them with boldness and confidence. May we always remember and thanks those who fought and struggled with these truths in the past. May we through our prayers always lift high the Cross of Christ in our churches and our homes as we make our strong confession in and through prayer.

ENDNOTES:

1. Lange, p. 553, *God So Loved the World – A Study of Christian Doctrine*
2. Lange, p. 554, *God So Loved the World – A Study of Christian Doctrine*
3. “Theses on Church Fellowship” p. 31,32
4. Lange, p. 555, *God So Loved the World – A Study of Christian Doctrine*
5. “Theses on Church Fellowship” p. 31,32
6. *Lutheraner*, 1908 cited in “The Synodical Conference and Prayer Fellowship” WLQ, Winter 2005 p. 37
7. Armin Schuetze, WLQ, Spring 1996, p. 123
8. “Prayer Fellowship”, WELS-COP, 1954, p.6
9. “Applications of the Principles of Church Fellowship”, John Brug, 1994, p. 15

BIBLIOGRAPHY

“*Prayer Fellowship*” Issued by the Conference of Presidents, The Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and other States, 1954.

Brug, John F. *Applications of the Principles of Church Fellowship*. Metro Conference Pastors Conference Paper. November 1994.

Brug, John F. *The Synodical Conference and Prayer Fellowship*. Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly Vol. 102:1 (Winter 2005).

Lange, Lyle W. *God So Loved The World – A Study of Christian Doctrine*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005.

Schuetze, Armin. *Joining Together in Prayer and the Lord’s Supper: The Scriptural Principles of Fellowship Applied to Prayer and holy Communion*. Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. 93:2 (Spring 1996).

_____, *Theses on Church Fellowship*, Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Commission on Doctrinal Matters, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1970.